

GUIDELINES ON SAIVA RITUALS

by

BRITISH SAIVA SIDDHANTA CENTRE

The Hindu Tamil Wedding Ceremony – In the South Indian Saivite Tradition

(Its religious significance & meaning)

Section 1:

Part A: SOME KEY TAMIL WORDS EXPLAINED

1. **Vanakkam:** A Tamil Greeting, which means ‘I bow to you in veneration’; it is accompanied by a gesture when the palms are placed together & brought near the centre of the chest as the head is bowed. (a common Indian Greeting)
2. **Kuththu Vilakku:** A Hindu ceremonial upright Oil-Lamp with five lights.
3. **Nirai-Kudam:** A sacred, ceremonial metal-pot (Sembu) filled with water & closed with a de-husked coconut & five mango leaves, and placed solemnly on a bed of rive spread out on a banana leaf on a table etc. Flowers, manchal (turmeric), sandal paste, fruits, etc., are placed around the sacred Sembu, which now represents fullness & auspiciousness and serves as a symbol of God. Spreading harmony & holiness all around the area.
4. **Siva:** The first of the Hindu trinity of Gods, Mahadeva. Also called Pasu-Pati, Lord of souls & Nataraja, Lord of Dance, energizing both the Cosmos & our individual hearts.
5. **Saivite-Hinduism:** The world’s oldest, pre-Vedic, Dravidian (South Indian) religion based on Bhakti or devotional surrender to the will of God.
6. **Home Fire:** Hindu sacrificial, ceremonial fire, used to make sacred offering to God.
7. **Ganapathy:** Primal Lord of wisdom, the eldest son of God Siva, and worshipped before the commencement of all major undertakings, including marriage, as He is the remover of obstacles, Vigna-Vinayaka; also called Aanai-Muhan, elephant-faced.
8. **Aalaaththi:** This is the waving of three lighted oil-wicks, suitably stood on a tray, by two married ladies in front of the bride & groom who are then blessed by the ladies with pottu or holy mark to ward off the Evil-Eye.

9. **Kaappuk-Kattal:** The tying of sanctified yellow thread by the priest on the Groom's right wrist & the Bride's left wrist, as a protection against evil spirits. This is removed at the close of the ceremony.
10. **Coconut-Breaking:** Signifies exposing the inner purity of one's heart in prayer, like the white kernel of the broken coconut, symbolizing the surrender of the supplicant's ego to God's will.
11. **Kannikaa-Thaanam:** The giving-away of the Bride by her parents to the Bridegroom citing the Home Fire & the guest-audience as witnesses.
12. **Koorai Saree:** Ceremonial & ornate Saree gifted by the Groom to the Bride.
13. **Thaali:** Golden holy wedlock-insignia worn as a pendant in a golden chain made (Maangalyam) especially for the ceremony on an auspicious day.
14. **Thaali Ceremony:** This is indeed the climax of the whole ceremony. After being taken around the Hall to receive the Blessing of all present the Groom ties the Thaali around the Bride's neck at the auspicious time, from which moment onwards, the Bride & Groom become man & wife.
15. **Aruku & Arici:** Blessing of the couple symbolically with Aruku (a kind of hardy grass) and Arici (original Tamil word for rice) signifying plenty.
16. **Vegetarian Food:** is central to all Hindu ceremonies, as Ahimsa (Non-killing) is a Hindu doctrine prohibiting the taking of any life for food; especially when healthy & palatable alternatives are available.
17. **Naathtaswaram:** Ancient Tamil Musical wind-instrument played especially in Hindu Temples and other Hindu auspicious ceremonies such as wedding etc., in South India & South Asian countries.

PART B: THE HINDU TAMIL WEDDING:

AN OUTLINE OF THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE CEREMONY:

1. **The Religious Basis:** All Saivite Hindu rituals are centered on the firm religious belief that the man & the woman are joined in holy matrimony by the Almighty God as Siva-Sakti who is therefore worshipped before & after the ceremony, symbolically through the lighted camphor which portrays God as the Light of our lives. The oil-lamp at the reception, the waving of lights in front of the kumbam are all meant to underline a prayerful attitude throughout the ceremony.
2. During the highlights of the marriage-rites, coconuts are regularly broken in half, by the Bride's maternal uncle, signifying purity of heart & self-surrender to the will of God. The Groom's uncle also takes part, alternately.

3. The Bridegroom accompanied by the Bride's younger brother (Tholan) is garlanded on arrival at the Temple or Hall by the Bride's father, after an Aalaaththi has been done to ward off the evil eye.
4. The groom then proceeds to the Manavarai (colorful dais) on the stage where the Hindu priest will conduct religious rituals, first in prayer & then to ensure divine protection against evil spirits (Kaappuk-Kattal) for the duration of the ceremony, first to the Groom & then to the Bride who is accompanied by a married sister of the Groom (Tholi)
5. Both the parents of the Bride & of the Groom now offer prayers together & bless each other and exchange greetings. The parents of the Bride symbolically hand over the Bride to the Bridegroom, literally holding her palms and putting her palms into the palms of the Groom. In the meantime, a ceremonial tray containing auspicious gifts together with the Thali (golden wedlock insignia and chain) & Koorai Saree, are taken around the hall by a married Elder from the Groom's family to be blessed by the guests. The tray is brought back to the Groom who now presents the Bride with the Koorai which she will take away, wear and come back for the Thali-Ceremony that follows.
6. The climax of this whole ceremony is reached when the Bride, wearing the new Koorai Saree, ascends the stage and sits on the right of the Groom on the dais and when both Bride and Groom join all the guests, now standing, in the singing of Holy Saiva Thirumurai hymns praying to the Almighty Siva-Sakti to bless them both. Following this solemn prayer and Pooja, the Bridegroom ties the sanctified Thali around the Bride's neck to the accompaniment of resounding music from the Naathtaswaram, the ancient South Indian instrument, played in Hindu temples and other joyous occasions.
7. The married couple now exchange garlands; holding hands with Tholan and Tholi, the couple go around the sacrificial Homa fire once, jointly put rice-puff into the Homa fire, and repeat this process twice more, to signify prayer and thanksgiving to God as Siva-Sakti.
8. Following this, the couple go through further rituals to help them to live up to high ideals in their married life: -
 - (a) **MOTHIRAM-EDUTHTHAL:** the picking-up rings from the water.
 - (b) **AMMI-MITHITHAL:** touching the stone base and grinder with the feet. (to signify unity in action for useful results.)
 - (c) **ARUNTHATHI-PARTHTHAL:** showing and seeing the Polar star. (stead-fast love.)
 - (d) **METTI MINCHI-ANITHAL:** wearing of silver toe-ring by the bride. (tell-tale sign of marriage.)
9. The couple now ceremoniously feed each other with milk and fruits. They offer final prayers and an Aalaaththi is again waved in front of them to ward off the evil eye.

10. The couple now sit on the dais to receive the blessing from relatives and friends who use the Aruku-Arici in the tray for this purpose, to signify long life and plenty.

This completes the ceremonial part of the Hindu Wedding Ceremony.

PART C: THE HINDU TAMIL WEDDING:

MARRIAGE AS AN IMPORTANT SAMAYAK-KIRIYAI

(Purificatory Rites)

Similar to the sacraments of baptism, marriage and the funeral service of Christians, **sixteen Samayak-Kiriyai, Hindu Samskaras** or Purificatory rites are duly administered to every Hindu through the various stages of his or her life. Some of the more important ones include:

1. A special ceremony is performed at the birth of a child.
2. Naming the child; taking the child out of the house into sunlight for the first time; and giving him or her solid food for the first time.
3. The first hair of the child is clipped, to symbolize the removal of any spiritual evil or physical uncleanness that the child may have brought from a previous life.
4. Administering of holy Dhikshai-Initiation (samaya, vishesha, sannyasa) into religious life by the Guru (spiritual preceptor) or saiva-aachariar.
5. **Marriage and Family Life:** A Hindu believes that according to his or her previous KARMA (the Law of cause and effect), a special person is destined for him or her as the marriage partner in life. The parents must try to seek out that special person they compare the age, temperament, education and other qualities of the prospective partners and then make a decision. A Hindu boy or girl is always romantically waiting for the day when he or she will see this “mate of the soul”. Love-life is said to blossom fully only after the wedding ceremony.
6. **Vanaprastha and Sannyasa:** After a period of active family and social life, Hindus are expected to retire for religious contemplation, especially after one’s children are married and other duties discharged. Vanaprastha is opting out of worldly life in order to prepare for Sannyasa, the holy order of Hindu renunciation who lead a life in total surrender to the will of God, in total freedom and enlightenment.
7. **Cremation:** At death all Hindus are cremated. The body comes from the ashes (the elements) and goes back into ashes. Hinduism holds that the human soul is deathless and eternal – the immortal spirit passes on into another body, according to the actions performed (KARMA) in this life. Before cremation, the body is anointed with oil on the head, bathed and dressed, laid out so that the

head faces the south, and after pooja, close relatives take part in the final ceremony of Vaikkarisi Iduthal, ceremonial blessing with rice and coins, before the body is removed to the crematorium / Last Rites.

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AUM NAMASIVAYA ANBE SIVAM

MAY THE ALMIGHTY LORD SIVA BLESS YOU ALL.

Section 2

GUIDELINES ON SAIVA RITUALS

by

BRITISH SAIVA SIDDHANTA CENTRE

(Educational Branch)

THE SAIVITE HINDU CREMATION RITE:

(EEMAK-KIRIYAI)

PART A: AN OUTLINE OF THE RITUALS

If it is known through medical or other sources that death is imminent, it is important to reassure the patient and maintain a calm atmosphere. It is an important Saivite tradition to quietly sing Thirumurai Hymns especially from the Thevaram and the Thiruvacagam so that the thoughts of those around and of the one facing death, can be centered on God Almighty giving peace and solace to all concerned.

Soon after death it is important to ensure that the eyes of the deceased are closed and the limbs straightened out so that the body lies as if in a sleeping position. In hospitals etc., this is usually taken care of by medical or other staff – funeral undertakers have also specialized facilities for embalming the body etc., so that the body can be kept for a matter of days, as may be necessary, before the cremation ceremony itself.

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The following essential and outline procedures should preferably be followed by Saivite Hindu while preparing for the performance of the Last rites at home or at the funeral parlor, prior to removing the body for cremation: -

1. The coffin should be placed with the head of the deceased pointing towards the South, the direction sacred to Yaman, the Lord of Death.
2. The ceremony begins with Pooja, after which the deceased is blessed with the sprinkling of Holy water over the body, followed by the singing of Hymns from the Saiva Thirumurai.
3. At the direction of an officiating Priest, the Last rites are performed by a very close relative of the deceased, Kolli Vaippavar (torch bearer), and followed by other relatives and friends, where appropriate.
4. The torch-bearer first puts Holy Ash on the deceased's forehead, then anoints the deceased's head with oil, ceremoniously sprinkles water from the Nirai-Kudam on the deceased's head and puts a garland around the deceased's neck.
5. At this point in the proceeding, grand-children of the deceased, if in the age range of 5 to 10 years old, may stand around the coffin holding lighted candles or joss-sticks (a token of last respects) for a short time.
6. The chief mourner will now take part in ceremoniously pounding sandal or turmeric powder in a suitable mortar and pestle (Thirupporchunnam idiththal) to the accompaniment of singing of some or all of the 20 Thirup-por chunnam hymns from the Thiruvacagam. At the end of this, the principal mourner will take some of this powder and use it to put a Pottu on the deceased's forehead.
7. After final prayers and blessing by the officiating priest, the chief mourner will bless the deceased for the last time by ceremoniously putting a few grains of rice and a copper coin in the mouth of the deceased (Vaaikkarici-Iduthal) and this is followed by all close relatives. Friends and others may now bless the deceased and pay their last respects with flowers.
8. The climax of the funeral rites is the ceremonial setting alight of the coffin by the chief mourner (Kolli-Vaiththal) who first goes around the coffin three times in a n anti-clockwise direction while carrying the earthenware pot containing burning embers and then ceremoniously light the coffin at the head while looking away from the deceased's body.
9. Soon afterwards, and after a final viewing and farewell from all relatives and friends, the coffin is closed and taken to the crematorium.
10. The final rites at the crematorium begin with prayers and hymns from the Saiva Thirumurai, followed by a short biography of the deceased, then by a Saiva Sermon after which the chief mourner will ceremoniously set the coffin alight.

PART B: THE SAIVITE HINDU POST-CREMATION RITES

It should be noted that Saivite Hindus observe an intensive period of mourning for at least ONE MONTH during which no auspicious events are celebrated in the bereaved family home. The religious basis for this is two-fold; to enable the soul of the deceased to find peace and solemnity before rebirth and to help the bereaved family to come to terms with the loss and to pray to the Almighty to bless the departed soul. The following two rituals are done to underline these sentiments: -

(1) ETTUCH-CHELAVU (Returning the Ashes back to the elements)

On the 3rd or 5th day after cremation, this shanti-ritual is performed to the deceased's ashes. Prior arrangements are made with the crematorium authorities to collect and retain the ashes in a suitable urn, etc., as early as possible, after the cremation is completed. On the chosen day, a Nirai-Kudam is put up and after prayers, the chief mourner or an elder in the bereaved family spreads out some of the ashes on a betel or banana leaf placed on a tray containing fruits, flowers, etc., Fresh milk is sprinkled over the ashes and lighted camphor waved on a tray containing holy ash. It is normal practice to have a favorite photo of the deceased framed and garlanded on this day. The contents of the tray including the ashes are ceremoniously taken and preferably submerged to mingle in flowing rivers or in an open sea as convenient – it is also appropriate to bury some of the ashes in a personal garden etc., to mingle with the earth.

(2) ANTHIYESTHI CEREMONY (31st day ceremony)

Technically, it is possible to have this ceremony on the 16th, 21st or 31st day after cremation but traditionally it is generally held on the 31st day when the house hold is ceremoniously cleansed, before inviting a Saiva priest to perform purificatory pooja and blessing. This is followed by the serving of meals to friends and relatives, thus officially ending the mourning period and resuming social life, as befits the nature of the loss and the family circumstances. Memorial functions can also be held.

In the case of sudden, accidental deaths or suicides etc., the mourning period is normally three months and special Shanthi-Poojahs are normally done to bless the departed soul and the bereaved family.

(3) ANNIVERSARY Pithur-Thithi Ceremony:

This is an important annual Saiva religious rite remembering the dead, especially the ancestors and broadly follows the ritual as in the case of the Anthiyesthi ceremony.

PART C: THE HINDU PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

Hinduism believes in a soul that is deathless and eternal, and which is in fact a part of God Himself, as a spark from a flame. At death we only discard the body as if we discard a worn-out garment. Names and forms are of no great significance at all and are only a matter of convenience. We fear death only because we fail to see or don't bother to see that life and death are not two separate states but merely two stages of one natural process; that life and death are

present in any given moment and though men may come and go, the golden thread of divine consciousness runs through life to keep the flame of life to burn eternally – thus in God’s master-plan of life, death is only a rest for the soul in search of the Universal, a step to regeneration in the pilgrim’s progress towards God as Sat-Chit-Ananda, Existence, Knowledge and Bliss. Saint Appar underlines the sense of urgency to have a purpose to life.

In the Hindu context, death is also the protest of the spirit against the unwillingness of the body-mind entity to accept transformation – the protest against stagnation. We are the manifestation of our karmic relations at any given moment and upon their modification, we change accordingly what we call life is no more than a procession of transformations – birth, change, decay and death, in a way as natural as the progression of the seasons. But then, how do we cope with grief and loss at a personal level? The answer lies according to Hinduism, in the unceasing quest for understanding the eternal Truth. The approach is very clinical and down to earth.

Owing to the I-am-the-body notion, death is feared as being the loss of oneself, birth and death pertain to the body only, but they are superimposed on the self through ignorance giving rise to the dualities of love and hate, pleasure and pain, life and death which are like undulations of the surface of seeming water in the mirage of the ego. The Hindu religious answer to this confusion and consequent grief is to try and transcend this duality. This is easily said than done. To suit individual needs, several paths have been put forward. The path of karma or selfless service, renouncing the fruits of action; the path of Gnana or intellectual discrimination and detachment and the most convenient path of Bhakti or self-surrender to the Will of God, so eloquently enshrined in the 15,000 hymns of our Saivite Hindu Thevaram, Thiruvacagam & Thirumurai. But of course, we know only too well that these paths meet and merge as we progress on the spiritual aim of life which is to seek Truth or ultimate wisdom or self-realization.

Perhaps, it is relevant to reflect on the concept of Karma which is central to Hinduism. Literally meaning action, karma based on the dynamic law of cause and effect is any kind of intentional action performed through thought, word or deed. Saivite Hinduism recognizes three strands of Karma-sanchitham, prapatham, and aagaamyam i.e., past, present and future aspects. Nevertheless, the Grace of God that flows from Bhakti or Self-surrender to God’s Will has the power to destroy the effects of karma in the light of wisdom which confers Jeevan-mukti, freedom in the embodied state. Karma is not fatalism because cause and effect are dynamic and Hinduism therefore believes that through knowledge, self-effort, service and prayer, one can overcome fate through God’s Grace or Siva-Gnanam and achieve peace of mind.

Finally, comfort and consolation comes from an enlightened acceptance of the fact that some personal losses and predicaments are beyond human control, because Hinduism proclaims that everything is part of a diving plan:

“Isaa vaasyam idam sarvam” says the Iso Upanishad.

“Nanre seivaai, pilai seivaai, yaano itharku naayagame” sings Saint Manickkavacagar.

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These sentiments are reflected in the popular serenity prayer with which we may conclude:

“Almighty God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

AUM NAMASIVAYA: AUM SHANTI, SHANTI, SHANTI

MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL.

[Extract from the book “Finding Fulfilment” Published by London Meikandaar Aadheenam]